



Avid Volvere turntable

by Jimmy Hughes

It's more than a year now since I reviewed Avid's Acutus turntable in these pages. And a mightily impressive reference-standard it turned out to be, redefining the capabilities of my vinyl records. But oh the cost! At a cool £5000 for the turntable alone, it's beyond reach for most of us. So I was intrigued when Avid designer Conrad Mas hinted that a cheaper model was in the pipeline. If Avid could offer a taste of the Acutus at a more affordable price, there'd clearly be a lot of interest...

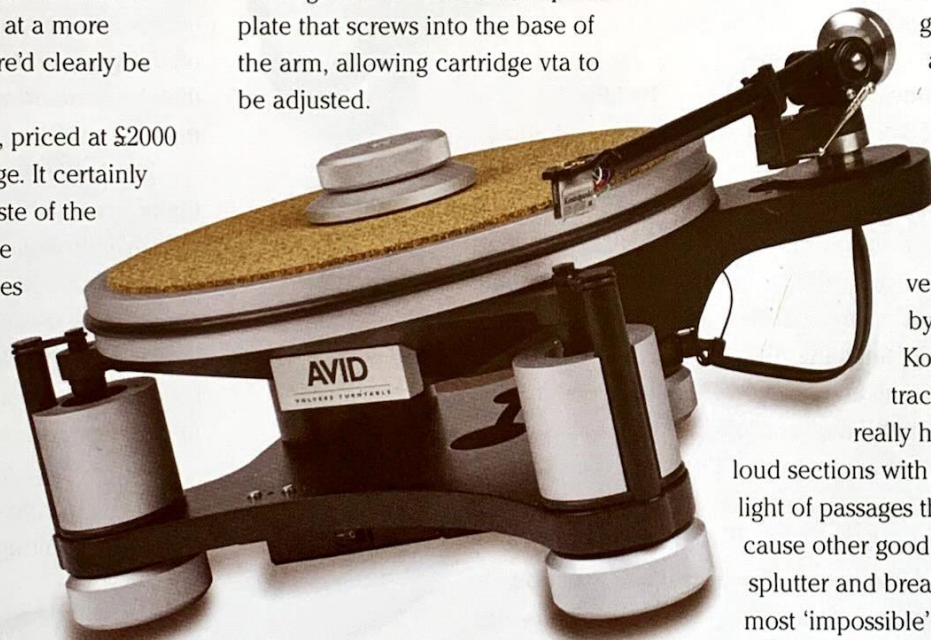
Enter the Volvere, priced at £2000 plus arm and cartridge. It certainly offers more than a taste of the Acutus. And while the cheaper turntable does inevitably fall short in certain key areas, its overall performance is exceptionally fine. Indeed, without a direct A/B comparison, there could be times when you'd be hard pressed to tell the difference.

The Volvere might not be the ultimate turntable on the planet, but it needs no excuses making for it. None at all.

My review Volvere was supplied with an Avid badged Rega RB-300 tonearm fitted with an Ortofon Kontrapunkt moving coil cartridge - the total package coming in at well under £3000. Agreed, it's still a lot of money, especially in these days of £99 DVD players and free mobile phones. But your cash buys plenty of good solid engineering - the Volvere looks and feels the class act it is. And, anyway,

good turntables never were cheap...

The massive ribbed sub-chassis is exceptionally rigid, with cut-outs ready to take a variety of tonearms, including SME, Rega, and Linn. Which means the Volvere can be used with most arms on the market with no need for separate arm boards or drilling - useful if you're thinking of changing arms at some future date. For Rega arm users there's a special plate that screws into the base of the arm, allowing cartridge vta to be adjusted.



The sprung sub-chassis is centred by three rubber O rings, keeping the whole platter/arm assembly stable in relation to the drive motor while allowing up and down movement. This ensures excellent isolation, while taking away the tendency for the whole assembly to move in a lateral direction when excited. The system itself is very simple but effective. 33 and 45rpm speeds are available at the touch of a button, and the platter is fitted with a thick rubber ring to damp resonance.

Conrad himself installed the Volvere for me, and overall it seems

pretty easy to set up. Once installed, it shouldn't need much (if any) adjustment. It's designed to be non-tweaky. But what of the sound? First impressions aren't always reliable, but the thing that immediately stood out with the Volvere combination was its exceptional rock-like stability; the music sounded solid and focussed.

It sounded like the stylus was in total contact with the groove wall at all times, and thus able to follow each undulation with precision and ease. I was very impressed by the Ortofon Kontrapunkt's tracking ability - it really handled difficult loud sections with aplomb, making light of passages that can easily cause other good pickups to splutter and breakup. Only the most 'impossible' discs will tax this cartridge.

The sound was extremely clean and refined, lending a smooth effortless quality to the reproduction. At the same time, dynamics were wide and the music sounded powerful and solidly focussed. These days when I play LPs, I don't want to be reminded about the tortuous mechanics of a diamond stylus being dragged around an undulating vinyl groove. I don't want to sit there worried in case the whole sound suddenly hits a patch of turbulence and falls apart. Leaving aside individual preferences on things like tonal balance, ▶

▶ dynamics, and fine detail, the fact that a turntable sounds solid and cohesive is perhaps the best indication that all the important fundamentals are right. If the stylus isn't able to follow the groove cleanly and precisely, then reproduction will prove frustratingly variable, and you won't be able to relax when you listen. In my book, this sort of security is priceless.

So the Volvere immediately created a positive impression by virtue of its sheer unflappability. Of course the arm and cartridge played their part too. But, without a solid foundation, even the best arm and cartridge will lose control. Clearly, the Volvere was providing a firm stable support, allowing both arm and cartridge to give of their best. Surface noise was extremely low, as was extraneous hiss and rumble. Speed stability was rock solid.

Overall, the music had a CD-like focus and precision, but minus CD's tendency to be clinical and overly analytical. Tonally, the sound was full-bodied and smooth, but not overly warm or rich. Bass was very firm and tight, while the upper treble was extended yet quite sweet and often surprisingly smooth and mellow. Although I'd describe the Volvere's musical presentation as detailed and crisp, rather than warm and beguiling, never was the sound cold or stark.

Priorities vary from person to person. When I play LP, I want reliable consistent musical presentation above all. Indeed, I'd be happy to sacrifice the last 'nth degree of sonic performance if it meant improved consistency and freedom from all the vicissitudes that can bedevil vinyl reproduction. I want an inky-black quiet background, no peak level distortion, no pitch waver, and no clicks and pops.

Unreasonable? You bet. But the

Volvere gets close to that impossible ideal - closer than you've any right to expect given the crudeness of a stylus tracing a wobbly groove in a bit of plastic. The trick is to maximise LP's intrinsically high resolution so that you're able to play music at what sounds like room filling volume,

without it actually being that loud.



Its LP's increased detail and presence that create the impression of a big sound against a quiet background.

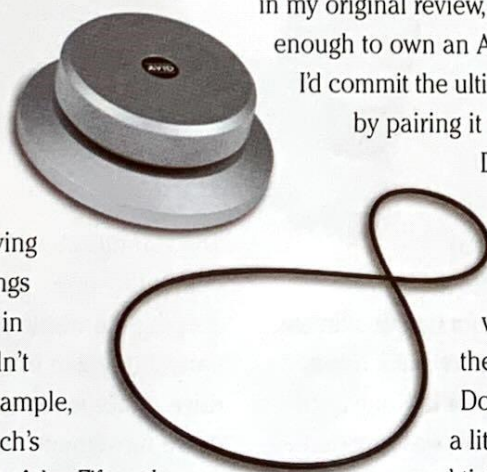
The Volvere arrived just before Christmas. To give it a fair hearing, I made the entire holiday period a CD free zone. In any case, it was high time I got re-acquainted with my LP collection! During the review period I had a binge on Shostakovitch, playing various LP recordings of the symphonies in performances I didn't have on CD. For example, Maxim Shostakovitch's pioneering 1971 LP of the *Fifteenth Symphony*, and Kyrill Kondrashin's 1967 account of the sixth - both originating from Melodiya tapes. I had excellent HMV LPs pressed in the West, and these provided good sound. But it proved more interesting and instructive to sample Kondrashin's Shostakovitch *Sixth* in an original Russian Melodiya pressing. By the highest standards

most Russian Melodiya LPs are not particularly good; surfaces are often coarse and crackly, cutting levels are low, and the frequency range is limited at both bass and treble extremes. My Melodiya pressing of Shostakovitch's *Sixth Symphony* has fairly quiet surfaces, but the sound itself lacks the brilliance and range of the UK HMV transfer.

Yet although dynamics were a shade compressed, and the frequency range restricted, it was remarkable to hear how effectively the Volvere presented the information present in the grooves. The result was a solid, focussed and surprisingly crisp sound. I used to avoid Melodiya LPs like the plague, feeling they fell below acceptable standards. But, played on a very good turntable, it was clear that the standard was actually more than acceptable...

The Acutus was a real eye/ear opener, redefining the capabilities of the vinyl LP. Yet listening to it wasn't all sweetness and light. At times it was almost too stark and contrasty, giving a sharp and highly detailed presentation so immediate it almost hurt. As I said in my original review, were I lucky enough to own an Acutus myself,

I'd commit the ultimate blasphemy by pairing it with a QR



Developments

Ringmat while using a Shun Mook Mpingo weight in place of the supplied clamp. Doing so sacrifices a little sharpness and tightness, but this is

offset by gains in ease and naturalness. The Volvere sounds sweeter and rounder. Partly because it features a comparatively soft 'lossy' cork and rubber composite mat, it's less forward and immediate than the Acutus with its acrylic mat. As a consequence, I felt little or no need to try the Ringmat. When I finally did, there ▶

▶ wasn't really any improvement. So I mostly used the Volvere as supplied.

The Avid record clamp is brilliant at flattening warped LPs. The clamp fitted to the Volvere is simpler than the one that comes with the Acutus, and its rubber protection ring means it doesn't mark LP record labels. Sonically, the clamp firms up the lower frequencies, resulting in a tighter punchier sound. You could use the Volvere without its clamp, but the raised circle near the spindle tends to lift the centre of the LP off the platter. This is done deliberately so that, with the clamp tightened, vibration is channelled down through the centre spindle that acts as an energy path for mechanical resonance. With the centre of the LP raised slightly, and a clamp pressing down on the edge of the label, the grooved portion is pushed down hard on the platter, thereby flattening even quite badly warped and dished LPs. Not everyone approves of record clamps, but there's little question that Avid's has many positive benefits.

One other reason why the Volvere sounds less sharp and immediate than the Acutus is that the former uses a smaller, less powerful motor. The Volvere's 5kg platter is half the weight of the Acutus' 10kg platter, and therefore needs less torque to drive it. The Volvere's built-in power supply is likewise smaller and less powerful. This really makes a difference. Although the Volvere's power supply is entirely adequate, a bigger supply nevertheless improves tightness and focus.

I mention this because Conrad played me a more ambitious version of the Volvere called The Sequel. To be launched at the Bristol show, February 2002, it features (you guessed it)

a bigger more powerful motor and a beefier outboard power supply. The Sequel will retail for £3500, but existing Volvere owners will be able to upgrade by buying the improved power supply and motor for £1600 - or £1500 if the old motor and PSU are given back in part-exchange. So you could buy a Volvere



now, then perhaps a year or so later update it to the Sequel by getting the new motor and power supply. Comparing the Volvere to the Sequel, the latter offers a crisper more immediate presentation. Rhythmically, it sounds 'faster' and musically more purposeful. Bass and treble extremes are slightly more extended, and there's a marginal increase in dynamics and overall loudness too. It's a tighter more athletic sound.

Sonically, the Acutus is ahead of the Sequel in ways that are similar - it's even sharper, tighter, and more crisply focussed. The Sequel is reasonably close to the Acutus, in terms of sharpness, but has something of Volvere's tonal sweetness. Only you can say whether or not the differences in sound quality are reflected by differences in price. Although the Sequel and Acutus do undoubtedly offer superior sharpness and detail, the poor old 'cooking' Volvere is hardly lacking in such areas - it's all a matter

of degree.

Much depends on how source-dependant your hi-fi is. In mine, the Volvere sounded impressively crisp, lucid, and focussed - to the point where further improvements might almost seem an unnecessary luxury. I could certainly live with the Volvere. That said, on the evidence of what I heard of the Sequel, I'd say the latter

does offer a worthwhile increase in resolution - especially if the music you listen to thrives on rhythmic drive. How sharp do you want it to be? The Volvere strikes a nice balance between extremes, being crisp and focussed on the one hand, yet sweet and mellifluous on the

other. The more expensive Avid turntables tip the scales towards increased brilliance and immediacy, with the Sequel offering what is perhaps the best compromise in terms of price and performance. Assuming you hear all three, agree with my assessment, but can't afford a Sequel, it's good to know you can buy a Volvere and upgrade it later with no price penalty. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Belt-driven, three point suspended sub-chassis
Speeds:	33 and 45 RPM, electronically switched
Clamp:	Yes
Lid:	No
Arm mounts:	Pre-cut for Linn and SME. Adapter plate for Rega.
Dimensions:	420x290x300 mm
Weight:	12.2 kg
Finish:	Black and Silver
Price:	£2000

Manufacturer:

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